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## Personal Reflection: Lessons from My Students and Other Reflections on SoTL

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# Personal Reflection: Lessons from My Students and Other Reflections on SoTL

## **Abstract**

Excerpt: As I sit here in my office 'chair,' both literally and figuratively, I am reflecting on my relationship with the scholarship of teaching and learning. My thoughts wander to influences on my career in SoTL, the impact SoTL has had on my professional life, the dilemmas in the field that I continue to ponder, ways we advocate for and support SoTL work, and my hopes for the future of SoTL. As I write this, it occurs to me that I have been directly involved in SoTL for 25 years—a quarter of a century! This fact makes me feel both a little bit 'old' and very joyful. I confess that, initially, I stumbled into SoTL rather than having made a conscious, well-thought-out decision or choice to engage in SoTL; these would come later.

I entered the field of SoTL through my discipline and local institution; making national-international and cross-inter-disciplinary connections would also come later.

## **Keywords**

SoTL

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## Lessons from My Students and Other Reflections on SoTL

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As I sit here in my office ‘chair,’ both literally and figuratively, I am reflecting on my relationship with the scholarship of teaching and learning. My thoughts wander to influences on my career in SoTL, the impact SoTL has had on my professional life, the dilemmas in the field that I continue to ponder, ways we advocate for and support SoTL work, and my hopes for the future of SoTL. As I write this, it occurs to me that I have been directly involved in SoTL for 25 years—a quarter of a century! This fact makes me feel both a little bit ‘old’ and very joyful. I confess that, initially, I stumbled into SoTL rather than having made a conscious, well-thought-out decision or choice to engage in SoTL; these would come later. I entered the field of SoTL through my discipline and local institution; making national-international and cross-inter-disciplinary connections would also come later.

Over the last few years, I have conducted a series of small, local SoTL studies with sociology majors focusing on their learning in the discipline. My students told me about the ‘connections’ that help them learn: to others, to the discipline, across courses, to their lives and the world around them, and among related ideas and skills. Their responses revealed their location on a pathway from disciplinary novice to expert (McKinney, 2007a). They admitted their confusion about important ideas in the discipline and their belief that they are not really sociologists but, perhaps, are junior sociologists as they don’t yet have the degree or particular experiences or are not planning to be professional sociologists. Yet, they acknowledge their new habit of analyzing the world from a sociological perspective. They report moderate to high levels of engagement in the discipline. My students talk about learner autonomy as balancing their own responsibility for learning with knowing when and how to seek help and collaborate (McKinney and Naseri, 2009). It occurs to me now that there are many similarities between these findings from my students and my learning about and development as a SoTL researcher and advocate.

As we focus on our professional and personal lives, it can be easy to forget the interpersonal connections that influence our SoTL work. Just as my students emphasized the importance of others—faculty and peers—to their learning and success, many people and organizations have impacted my thinking about, opportunities in, and success with SoTL including Carla Howery<sup>1</sup>; Pat Cross; Pat Hutchings; Mary Huber; colleagues involved with the American Sociological Association’s Section on Teaching, Learning and Sociology (ASA STLS), *Teaching Sociology*, the Carnegie Foundation, and the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL); journal editors and reviewers from SoTL publications; the members of my Carnegie Scholars’ cohort and especially the “quivering epiphanies” group; colleagues at Oklahoma State and Illinois State Universities; and all my students over my many years of teaching and learning. I doubt that I have acknowledged the influence of these people and organizations adequately and, thus, I do so again here. Not only have I learned much from them but the early isolation and, sometimes, disapproving reactions I faced for working in this area have long since vanished or become irrelevant, in large part, due to these people and groups.

Engagement in sociology matters to my students' learning and my engagement in and passion for the field of SoTL has contributed to my learning and my movement from novice toward expert in that field. I remember telling an interviewer years ago that being a college professor was not my job or my career, it was who I am. The specific features of this identity have developed and changed over time, but teaching has always been a large part of this identity. As I listened to others and reflected on my values and work, I came to believe that those of us who sign a contract and take a pay check, at least in part to teach, are ethically obligated to be the best teachers we can be and to be scholarly teachers.

I began teaching as I had been taught with little explicit focus on learning. I began to use classroom assessment techniques before I knew what they were (Angelo and Cross, 1993) and to read *Teaching Sociology*. My SoTL work grew out of what I did know - the theories and methodologies of my social science discipline<sup>2</sup>. My focus in the SoTL world has always been practical. Again, similar to my students, my learning was enhanced by the relevance to my life, in this case to my own teaching and the 'teaching-learning problems' I faced (Bass, 1999). I conduct small, local studies. My main goal is to enhance learning. I try to support SoTL by helping others do their own SoTL work (McKinney, 2007b). I am proud of my efforts on the practical side of SoTL but I don't believe that I have developed any wonderfully wise, big picture ideas in the field. My background and prior training are not in education. And I sometimes worry about my movement away from traditional disciplinary research in sociology. Thus, though I have come a long way on that pathway to SoTL expert, similar to my students in sociology, I still have questions about my expertise and identity.

Just as my students struggle with key concepts in their discipline, I continually puzzle over key questions or ideas in the field of SoTL. For example, I wonder just how broadly SoTL should be defined and the pros and cons of various conceptions. In the words of Huber and Hutchings (2005), how big should the SoTL tent be? I contemplate the criteria or meaning of quality in SoTL work given the great diversity of that work. I debate with myself and others as to how to persuade colleagues to engage in or, at least, cooperate with and make use of SoTL work, as well as that the work is valuable. I think about the implications of a movement from disciplinary-based to interdisciplinary SoTL work and from the local to cross-institutional and cross-national contexts. I debate the ways, and whether I am doing all I can, to engage student voices in SoTL work (Werder and Otis, 2009).

My students noted that learner autonomy was about taking responsibility for their own learning including knowing when to seek help and work with others. Most of us can support SoTL and promote autonomy in doing SoTL by being agents of social change and helping others conduct and use SoTL. For me, right now, that type of effort includes, for example, the following. I continue to reflect on the purposes and outcomes of these efforts.

- planning a study of the sociology capstone course,
- drafting a prospectus for an edited book on SoTL across the disciplines,
- synthesizing the reflections from the members of our campus spring SoTL working group/learning community,
- creating an internal publication of SoTL work at my institution,

- preparing several SoTL workshops for faculty colleagues and graduate students,
- reading drafts of colleagues' SoTL papers,
- sending information about SoTL to Deans and Chairs new to campus,
- reviewing SoTL journal and conference submissions,
- updating our institutional SoTL website,
- helping departments/schools with their internal SoTL grants,
- prepping a graduate seminar on teaching sociology with a SoTL component, and
- thinking about how to better support SoTL in my discipline as incoming Chair of the ASA STLS.

I would love to hear of additional ways people are advocating for and supporting SoTL with and for others—particularly efforts to do and use SoTL beyond the classroom level.

This leads me to my hopes for the future of SoTL; hopes I know many of you hold as well. I hope to see more people across a broad spectrum of disciplines, institutions, and nations involved in SoTL work and increased resources, legitimacy, and value for our work. I want SoTL work to be stronger in quality, theory, and connections to prior and related research. We should continue to learn from traditional education research but not become that same work as SoTL has a unique identity and value. And, though more interdisciplinary, multi-institutional, and cross-national SoTL work will be valuable, we also don't want to lose the SoTL characteristics of local and discipline-based. Finally, we can do a better job of creating impact from our SoTL work, of truly making a difference in student learning, and at/in a variety of levels and contexts.

Reflection is an ongoing process, of course, and I think I have had enough for now. It is time to get out of my chair—the literal one—to stretch, take a deep breath, and connect these reflections back to my own practical work. It is time to get back to all the challenging and joyful things we do to engage in, help others engage in, be advocates for, and use SoTL to enhance learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Carla Howery, former Deputy Executive Officer of the American Sociological Association and the key advocate in our discipline for a strong disciplinary focus on teaching, learning, and SoTL, passed away this spring. Her loss is another reason for my recent reflection and her spirit will always be with everyone who was touched by her life.

<sup>2</sup> Members of the ISSOTL Sociology Internal Interest Group have proposed a panel for the October 2009 meetings on how Sociology can help those in other disciplines do SoTL.